Book Review
Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell,
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000
pp. xiii, 360, illus.,
ISBN: 0521467012 paperback, £15.95 $22.95
0521461359 hardback, £42.50, $64.95

This fascinating book attempts to do what is too rarely done: to integrate the physical histories of life and death with the mental and spiritual worlds that gave meaning to such terminal events. Cunningham and Grell have set themselves the task of describing the frightening ways in which Europeans sickened and died in what they call Reformation Europe. During the decades between 1490 and 1650, roughly speaking, most parts of Europe coped with several new threats to daily life: new or fairly new diseases (syphilis, siege disease, the English Sweat, continuing outbursts of plague); newly destructive warfare on a new and larger scale; and new outbreaks of famine and starvation after the relatively abundant decades of the fifteenth century. Even the weather failed to cooperate, and Europe slid into what some have called a “Little Ice Age.” Most Europeans had reason to believe that they were being attacked or chastised more severely and more abruptly than ever before. And so they were understandably attracted to the notion that the reason for their current distresses was the anger of God and the impending Second Coming of Christ, the Apocalypse so mysteriously described by St. John’s Revelation. Cunningham and Grell have organized their book so that we first learn about the various apocalyptic expectations of late medieval and early modern people and the ways in which they understood the awesome image of four distinct horsemen of destruction: the riders of the white, red, black, and pale horses of final destruction. This is a useful organizing device and allows our authors to summarize the latest findings of military historians, demographers, and historians of medicine. In certain respects they do more than merely summarize, for the level and interest of specialized information from Danish and Dutch sources goes well beyond what one could easily learn in the latest research literature. Basically they point repeatedly to the extreme conditions of the period 1490 – 1650, and reinforce the idea that life was indeed harsher and less forgiving during those decades. On so general a level, of course, this point has been well articulated before, for example by Henry Kamen’s The Iron Century (originally published in 1971). The authors do depart from standard narratives, however, in emphasizing the ways in which certain early modern societies managed to escape the Malthusian dilemma of ever-increasing population and limited food supplies. They are persuaded by David

Arnold, Esther Boserup, and especially Ronald Seavoy that there were means by which peasants could break out of subsistence agriculture, and that the main mechanism lay in "becoming a *commercial* society, producing food primarily for sale to the market" (p. 204). In early modern Europe the two first societies to find this solution were England and the Netherlands, and it was no accident, therefore, that they were the first agrarian societies to conquer the threat of famine.

What makes this book stand out from others, however, is the attention the authors lavish on religious interpretations of this period of new disasters and epidemics. But it is also here that the attentive reader senses an important difficulty. Cunningham and Grell tell us that all Europeans fitted their experience of mortality and threat into a renewed sense of apocalypticism, but almost all of their examples come from Protestant Europe. At times they admit that apocalyptic expectations were stronger or clearer in northern Europe, and perhaps this explains why the book's subtitle refers to "Reformation Europe." Can it really be said that Southern and Catholic Europe shivered under the same expectations as their Protestant brethren? The evidence collected would seem to suggest otherwise. Our authors are not, however, very well equipped to disentangle the various competing strands of apocalyptic thought. There was in fact no real consensus on what the white horse meant, for example, nor did Protestants agree on what the apocalypse itself would be like. This was a point emphasized some time ago by William Lamont in his Godly Rule: Politics and Religion, 1603-1660 (1969) and more recently by Robin Barnes, "Images of Hope and Despair: Western Apocalypticism ca. 1500-1800," in Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, vol 2, ed. Bernard McGinn (1998). If Grell and Cunningham had paid adequate attention to the varieties of apocalyptic expectation, they might have managed to present a more plausible thesis about the ways in which all Europeans used the Revelation of St John as the lens through which they understood their turbulent age. Even so, they have written an important book that stimulates even as it summarizes. The plethora of excellent illustrations also make the book a joy to look at.

H. C. Erik Midelfort
University of Virginia